

# Office Management Professionals: essential skills in a global marketplace

## *Profissionais de Secretariado: competências fundamentais num mercado global*

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### Abstract

The current organizational reality poses new challenges and new demands to the various organizational agents. In order to meet the needs imposed by a context marked by globalization, internationalization, and technology, today's marketplace demands the constant updating of knowledge and skills. Office Management Professionals, who are key to any organization, are no exception. In recent years, the role of these professionals has gone through enormous changes, which range from the adaptation of tasks to different companies to the development of competences meant to be applied to new areas of intervention and performance. The present study aims to identify Office Management Professionals' skills organizations value the most. Thus, a survey was conducted on a sample of organizations coming from diverse activity sectors and with different dimensions. The results of the study shall be herein presented and discussed.

**Keywords:** skills, organizations, office management

### Resumo

*A realidade organizacional atual coloca, diariamente, novos desafios e novas exigências aos vários atores organizacionais. Com efeito, para dar resposta às necessidades impostas por um mercado marcado pela globalização, pela internacionalização e pela tecnologia, é necessária uma constante atualização de conhecimentos e de competências. O profissional de secretariado, enquanto peça-chave no funcionamento organizacional, não é exceção. A função de secretário tem vindo, nos últimos anos, a sofrer enormes transformações, as quais vão desde a adaptação das suas tarefas ao contexto onde se insere até à extensão das suas competências a novas áreas de intervenção e desempenho. O presente estudo tem como objetivo central contribuir para identificar as competências dos profissionais de secretariado mais valorizadas pelas organizações. Desta forma, foi realizado um inquérito a uma amostra de organizações de vários sectores de atividade e de várias dimensões. Serão apresentados os resultados do estudo conduzido e discutidas as suas principais implicações.*

**Palavras-chave:** competências, organizações, secretariado

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The “global village”, as predicted by McLuhan [1964] some fifty years ago, is now a reality. The advent of the twenty-first century has witnessed a new and fast-changing world where we all seem to be connected as if we were members of a single community. Technological advances, especially the “extraordinary human

adventure” called Internet [Castells 2003], on the one hand, and the accentuated increase of people’s mobility and subsequent workforce diversity, on the other hand, are amongst the most relevant aspects of this revolution.

It’s indeed undeniable that technological advances have revolutionized the way we live, work, and relate to one another. People are now connected by mobile devices, with unprecedented processing power, storage capacity, and access to knowledge, and assume all this information should be easily accessible and shared or validated on-demand, that is, following the proceedings of real-time communication.

In a fast and competitive world, where many of us are tech-savvy and demand immediacy when requiring information or exchanging data, email, video conferencing, social media, chat rooms, intranet systems, etc. have become essential tools to the workplace as well. Not only do they enable increased speed, frequency, and reach of communication with other employees, partners, suppliers, customers, and organizations, but they also allow “people from opposite ends of the world to work together seamlessly 24 hours a day” [Thill/ Bovée 2014]. In other words, it’s not only about responding quickly and effectively or collaborating rapidly and successfully with your local stakeholders, but it’s also about achieving a higher goal, which is conducting business on a global scale with relatively inexpensive tools.

Pushing boundaries and crossing national markets to compete on a global scale is a challenging endeavour for a number of very different reasons. Our focus here, though, will be on the communication and interpersonal skills involved in such process. Drawing on the importance of technological advances in today’s changing environment, Thill and Bovée [2014] reinforce that technology also showcases one’s communication skills, revealed in every e-mail message, video teleconference or telephone call. This will lead us to the importance of good communication in business.

Organizations are, above all, communicative communities [Ricardo 2003]. As Duarte and Monteiro [2009] explain, communication is undoubtedly present in all organizational processes, it is the energy that circulates in all systems and the cement that gives consistency and strengthens organizational identity; it is present in every sector, in every relationship, in every flow of information and spaces for interaction and dialogue. It “is the lifeblood of all organizations: it is the medium through which companies access the vital resources they need in order to operate” [Van Riel and Fombrun 2007]. Communication allows organizations to acquire the primary resources they need, but also to build up valuable stocks of secondary resources, such as “legitimacy” and “reputation”. Communication is, therefore, the heart of organizational performance [Idem]. Moreover, in a global and competitive world, where the quality of ideas, excellence, work ethics and social responsibility, management of interactions or image promotion play a central role, communication is, therefore, an absolutely strategic area for organizations. Without communication, there isn’t organization, management, cooperation, motivation, sales, offer and demand, marketing, coordinated work processes [Rego 2010].

Yet, when a company “goes global” and its workforce needs to interact at an international level, with individuals with different cultural, legal and ethical backgrounds and different business practices, another

specific set of communicative skills becomes tremendously important: knowledge of foreign languages and, on the other hand, intercultural awareness [Martin and Nakayama 2004; Sharifian and Jamarani 2013]. As Michael Morley [2004] explains,

Proficiency in more than your native language is a major advantage. It signals both your respect for and interest in people of other nations, in addition to allowing you to work more easily in a variety of environments. You will put interactions with your colleagues and audiences in other nations on a different and stronger footing. (...) Respect for the customs and etiquette of each distinct society, country, nation or religion is essential. Not only should these customs be learned, they should be practised.

In order to communicate effectively in the globalized world, it's vital to a company's success to have an insight into how different cultures perceive the world around them and communicate, how different countries trade and do business, how different cultures manage people. Culture does determine how individuals encode and interpret verbal and non-verbal messages, how they assess context and value authority, how they deal with the fact that information may be more or less explicit or that the decision-making processes may have different paces. Different meanings of time, formality levels, personal space and touch, eye contact, and gift-giving, as well as acceptable conversation topics or even displays of emotions, etc., are all influenced by cultural factors, and being aware of all that may represent the key to succeeding in an international business negotiation.

In order to meet the needs imposed by a context marked by globalization, internationalization, and technology, today's marketplace demands the constant updating of knowledge and skills. Office Management Professionals, who are key to any organization and, therefore, a vital part of the economy [Gaebler n.d.], are no exception.

According to the Career Planner [n.d.], a North-American platform that specializes in career and personality tests, career counseling and coaching tools, this occupation is expected to be among those with the largest number of new jobs. In recent years, the role of these professionals within organizations has gone through enormous changes; presently, and though they still preserve an organizing function, they perform fewer clerical tasks and are increasingly taking on the roles of information and communication managers.

Long gone are the days when secretaries were just used to answer the phone, type letters, and file documents. In today's global market, office managers or administrative assistants – “the calm eye of the storm that rages around them”, as the European Management Assistants Association [n.d.] curiously puts it – must fill a much broader role, now moulded by the challenges of a demanding and extremely competitive world.

The roles and profiles of these professionals have changed considerably in the past decades. These are now expected to be versatile individuals with an eclectic training, which allows them to tackle different areas such

as planning, communication, psychology, leadership, marketing or finance. They know the philosophy, culture, and climate of the company; they take the function of facilitator between the company and all internal and external stakeholders, by coordinating information, communicating quickly and effectively, managing relationships and conflicts, and by assuming firm ethical behavior in all those processes. Furthermore, today's office managers are willing to continuously invest in the development of competencies meant to be applied to new areas of intervention and performance of their companies. These new skills grant these professionals, on the one hand, a higher level of autonomy and, on the other, a higher level of responsibility for the achieved results [Almeida *et al.* 2010; Borges 2009; Dieterich and Ferro 2012; Ramos and Batista 2004; Santos 2012].

Although responsibilities vary from business to business, according to each company's typology and dimension, market, area of operation, purpose and target audiences, there are three well-defined areas or dimensions [Le Boterf 2005] that should be developed and integrated in a holistic manner:

1. "know" (scientific knowledge)
2. "know-to-be" (attitudes and assertiveness)
3. "know-how" (task performance)

As we have seen, the world is subject to constant change and competition is fierce, which forces companies to constantly adapt and evolve if they want to maintain their position in the market. This logic persists when it comes to office staff, who must also adapt themselves to a marketplace that demands professionals with highly qualified profiles. According to Amaral *et al.* [2012], the development of these professionals' skills and knowledge should be based on four concrete pillars: a. administrative assistance, by applying techniques that foster the establishment of functional routines; b. management, by efficiently and effectively applying skills that allow a positive outcome in terms of organization, planning, monitoring and evaluation of work; c. Entrepreneurship, through the creation, promotion and implementation of solutions that improve work processes; d. Consultancy, through the analysis and understanding of the organizational culture, by identifying critical points and proposing improvement strategies.

The second dimension comprises behaviors, habits, attitudes, sense of professionalism and ethics that resides in each individual. Due to their central position within organizations, office management professionals' range of personality traits and interpersonal skills are quite ample. For example, they are required to reveal emotional maturity and balanced attitudes, know how to act and react in situations where possible tensions and conflict could interfere with the positive work environment, and they should always convey an image of credibility and professionalism, which is even more critical when it comes to communicating with external stakeholders. Furthermore, these professionals should aim to assume an assertive and real proactive attitude, by seeking to become a real support to the company's necessary work processes [Dimas *et al.* 2013].

Finally, and according to the Career Planner [n.d.], it's a fact that as the reliance on technology continues to expand, the role of office professionals has evolved as well, and now they're expected to assume practical and technical responsibilities that were once reserved for managerial and professional staff.

On the whole, today's administrative assistants are highly qualified professionals who gather a broad knowledge and diverse technical abilities, which are effectively applied in a company's administrative and direct assistance areas. They are guided by a notion efficiency and professionalism, aim to reach an understanding and systemic view of the organization, and seek in proactive and assertive manners to reach organizational strategic objectives.

## **2. CASE STUDY**

This study aims to identify the range of essential skills that office management professionals must possess, from the perspective of Portuguese companies' senior management. The adopted methodology aims to explore how the results can vary depending on the characteristics of the organization.

### ***2.1. Methodology***

The identification of the companies for the present study was carried out through research on the Internet and on corporate databases. Departing from these sources of information, the research team built a database consisting of 1000 companies from various industries and different regions of the country.

To collect data, researchers created an online survey using a Google tool, which was then sent to the identified companies. The contact was established through personalized email, where the purpose of the study and the required type of collaboration were explained. Two weeks after the first contact, a second email was sent to the companies that had not yet responded to the survey. This procedure was again repeated a week later. Results refer to the data collected during the months of April and May 2016.

The first part of the survey aimed to characterize the organization: name, business area, location and dimension were requested. In this initial section, the international dimension of the surveyed companies was also assessed. Three sequential questions were posed: firstly, respondents had to indicate whether their organization conducts business with foreign countries. In case of an affirmative answer, two further items were questioned: what are the countries they trade with (a maximum of five) and what is the percentage of turnover generated abroad.

In the second part of the survey, the research team asked the senior management of the inquired organizations to indicate from a list of provided items the degree of importance to their business of the skillset office management professionals should possess. Respondents had to specify their choices through a Likert scale of four points, where 1 represented "not important" and 4 to "very important." The list of skills was divided into two distinct areas: technical skills (Figure 1), which comprise competences related to business communication,

first language and foreign languages, the use of computer programs, among others; personal and interpersonal skills (Figure 2), which sought to evaluate aspects related to the personal characteristics of the professionals that contribute to the quality of individual and teamwork. These lists could also be expanded by each of the respondents, by filling in the available blank fields with further skills not included in the provided lists, yet considered important by the surveyed companies.

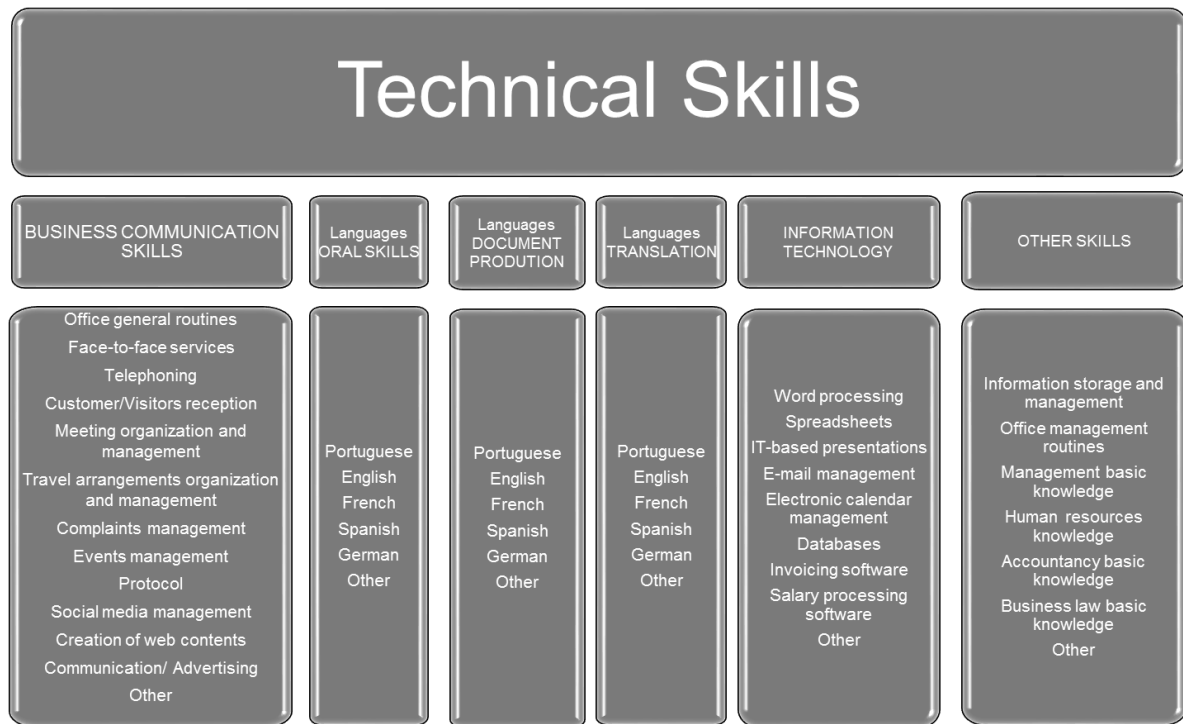


Figure 1 - List of office management professionals' technical skills outlined in the questionnaire



Figure 2 – List of office management professionals' personal and interpersonal skills outlined in the questionnaire

In order to assess the comprehensibility of the items and the response scale used by the target population of the study, a pilot study was conducted with some companies, selected for this specific purpose. Those

previously surveyed companies presented some suggestions, especially in terms of the clarity of the instructions, which were then incorporated into the final version of the survey.

## 2.2. *Characterisation of the sample*

The final sample consisted of 63 companies, 9 of which are large companies (13.4%), 26 medium enterprises (38.8%) and 28 micro and small enterprises (41.8%). In terms of geographical location, and having NUTS 2 as a reference, 52 companies are located in the central region (77.6%), 11 in the northern region (16.4%), 2 in Alentejo (3%) and 2 in Lisbon Metropolitan Area (3%).

To the question whether companies do business with foreign countries, 58% (N = 39) answered positively (78% of the large enterprises sample report doing business with foreign countries; medium-sized and small/micro enterprises report a percentage of 65% and 58%, respectively). Researchers also inquired about the top five countries with which international business relationships are established. The results revealed that 53.8% of companies do business with Spain, 38.5% with France, 28.2% with the African Countries of Portuguese Official Language, 25.6% with the United Kingdom and 25.6% with Germany (as well as with other countries with less representative percentages). Finally, as regards to the approximate percentage of total turnover generated abroad, results indicate an average percentage of 43.8% (SD = 33.5%).

## 2.3. *Presentation and analysis of the results*

In the following section, the obtained results shall be presented. Tables 1 and 2 display the means and standard deviations obtained in matters related to the technical skills and Table 3 exhibits the results of the personal and interpersonal skills related questions<sup>1</sup>.

<b>Business Communication</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Information Technology</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Office general routines	3,43	0,56	Word processing	3,71	0,49
Face-to-face services	3,67	0,57	Spreadsheets	3,52	0,62
Telephoning	3,70	0,46	IT-based presentations	3,22	0,73
Customer/Visitors reception	3,67	0,51	E-mail management	3,65	0,51
Meeting organization and management	3,29	0,63	Electronic calendar management	3,46	0,67
Travel arrangements organization and management	2,89	0,79	Databases	3,16	0,83
Complaints management	3,30	0,80	Invoicing software	3,05	1,10
Events management	2,90	0,78	Salary processing software	2,73	1,12
Protocol	3,06	0,76	<b>Other technical skills</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>

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<sup>1</sup> Only one organization responded to the item 'Other Languages', being Mandarin was the response given.

Social Media management	2,71	0,92	Information storage and management	3,51	0,54
Creation of web contents	2,78	0,87	Office management routines	3,62	0,49
Communication/ Advertising	2,89	0,92	Management basic knowledge	3,27	0,57
			Human Resources knowledge	3,03	0,74
			Accountancy basic knowledge	3,00	0,78
			Business law basic knowledge	2,83	0,75

Table 1 - Technical skills – business communication and information technology related skills and other technical skills: means and standard deviations

Language Command	Oral skills		Document production skills		Translation skills	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Portuguese</b>	3,94	0,25	3,92	0,27		
<b>English</b>	3,48	0,62	3,46	0,69	3,35	0,68
<b>French</b>	2,63	0,77	2,57	0,76	2,70	0,80
<b>Spanish</b>	2,84	0,81	2,68	0,78	2,73	0,85
<b>German</b>	2,19	0,69	2,16	0,79	2,21	0,79

Table 2 - Technical skills at Language Command level: means and standard deviations

Personal and Interpersonal Skills	Mean	SD
Discretion	3,62	0,52
Loyalty	3,92	0,27
Ethics	3,86	0,35
Organization	3,71	0,46
Friendliness / Empathy	3,65	0,48
Politeness /Diplomacy	3,60	0,52
Proactivity / dynamism	3,68	0,47
Team work	3,65	0,48
Stress management	3,59	0,53
Conflict management	3,68	0,47
Interpersonal communication	3,67	0,51
Public communication	3,32	0,67

Table 3 - Personal and Interpersonal Skills: means and standard deviations

In addition to the characterization of the results obtained through the means and respective standard deviations observed in the global sample, the research team also sought to explore the existence of significant differences in the assessment of the importance of skills, depending on the size of surveyed organizations. The graphs



presented from Figure 3 to Figure 7 exhibit those differences; the indicated values are the average values within each company type — large, medium, and small and micro.

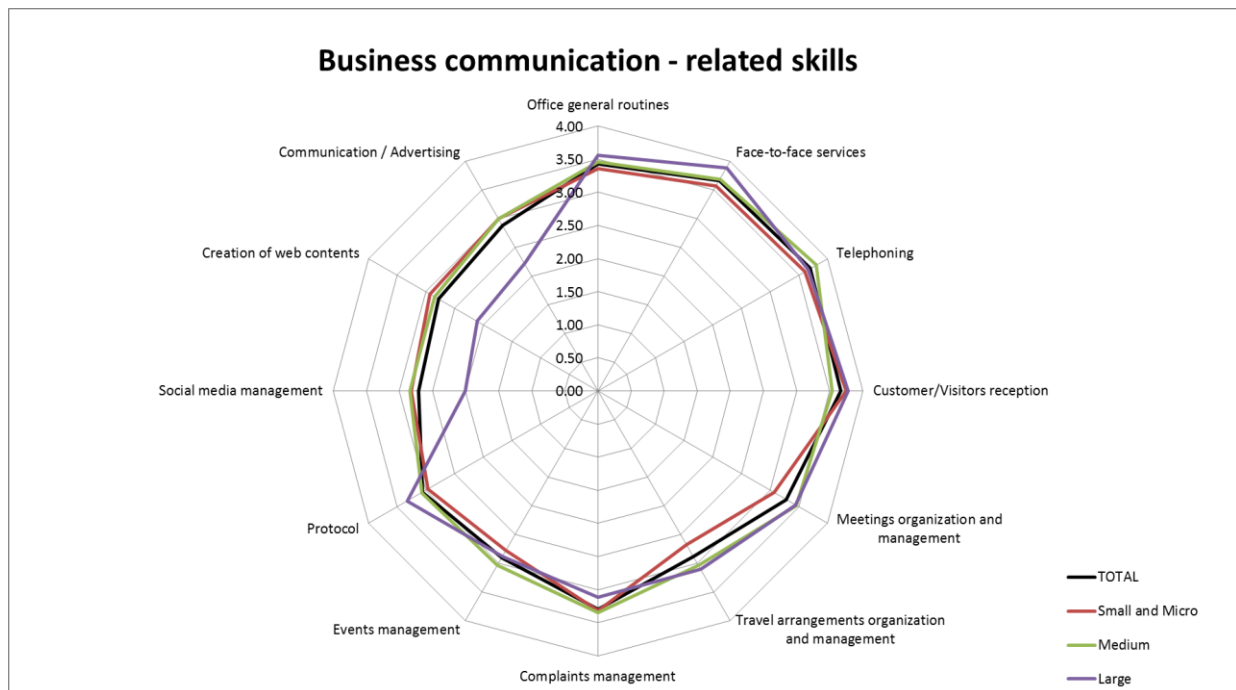


Figure 3 - Degree of importance given to skills related to the business communication area

Through the analysis of Table 1 and Figure 3, following conclusions can be drawn:

- Technical skills in areas such as personal customer reception and telephone customer services are considered fundamental;
- With high importance also arise skills in general office routines, complaints management and travel organization and management (although less relevant in micro + small businesses);
- It should be noted that large companies give a lower importance to skills related to social networks management, web content production, and tasks related to advertising. This assessment is probably related not with the fact that these areas aren't relevant to the organizations, but with the existence of professionals with specific expertise in those areas.

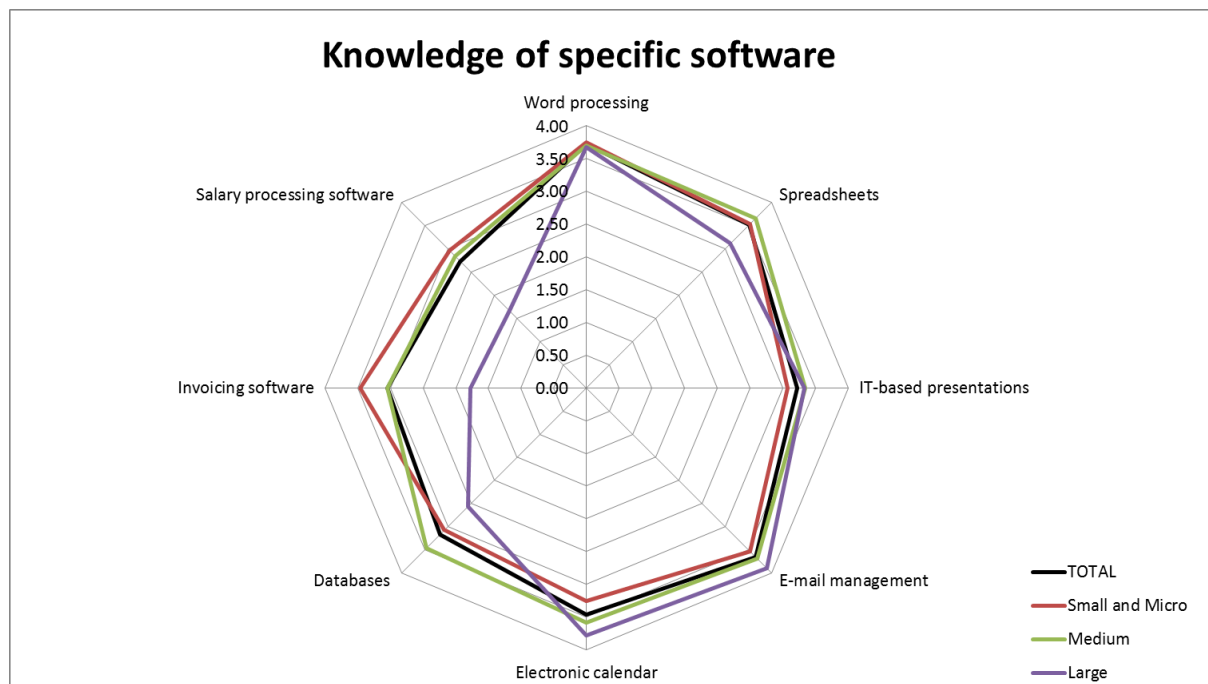


Figure 4 - Degree of importance given to skills related to the information technology area

The average values for the degree of importance in the software domain, as observed in Table 1 and in the chart in Figure 4, highlight the relevance given to word processing programs, electronic presentations, and e-mail management. Noteworthy is also the reduced importance given by large companies to the command of database programs and invoicing and payroll processing software. Nevertheless, these skills are considered important by the other types of companies.

As for the assessment of other skills, information storage and management, as well as the organization of daily and monthly office management routines, and basic knowledge of management are considered key skills. Moreover, knowledge of business law, accounting principles, and human resources management are valued by micro and small businesses, but considered unimportant by large companies (Table 1 and Figure 5).

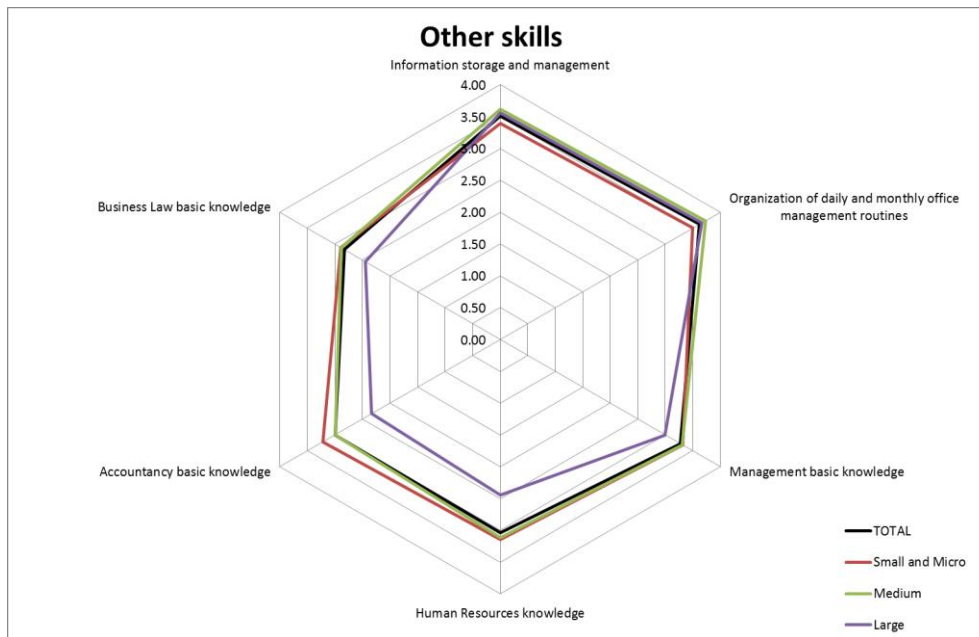


Figure 5 - Degree of importance given to other skills

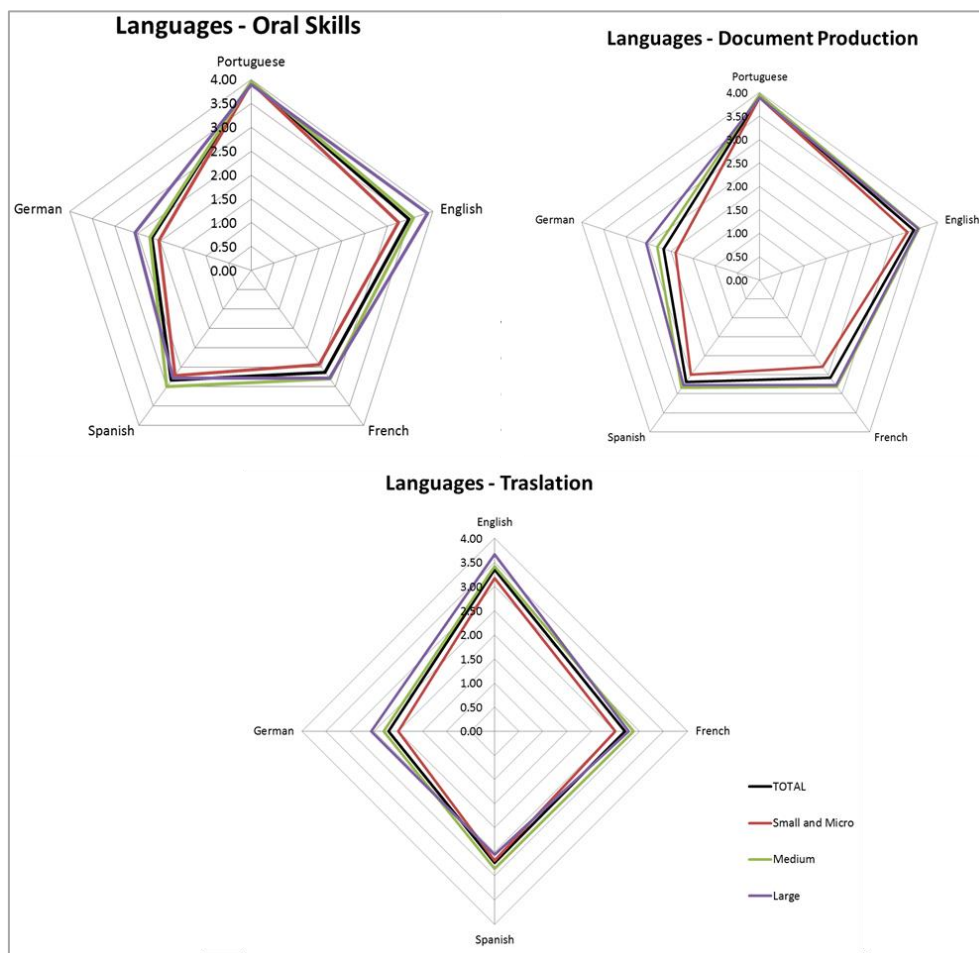


Figure 6 - Degree of importance given to language-related skills

As far as the command of languages is concerned, Table 2 and the graph in Figure 6 show that:

- A solid command of Portuguese, both in terms of oral proficiency and document production, is regarded as crucial by all surveyed companies;
- With regard to foreign languages, English is clearly preferred when compared to other foreign languages, both in terms of oral fluency, document production and also translation ability;
- Spanish emerged as the second foreign language recognized as most important by the surveyed companies (which can be related to the fact that more than 50% of companies have business contacts with Spain), followed by French. It is noteworthy that in large enterprises the level of importance assigned to the German is higher than in other companies, lying very close to the degree awarded to the Spanish and French languages.

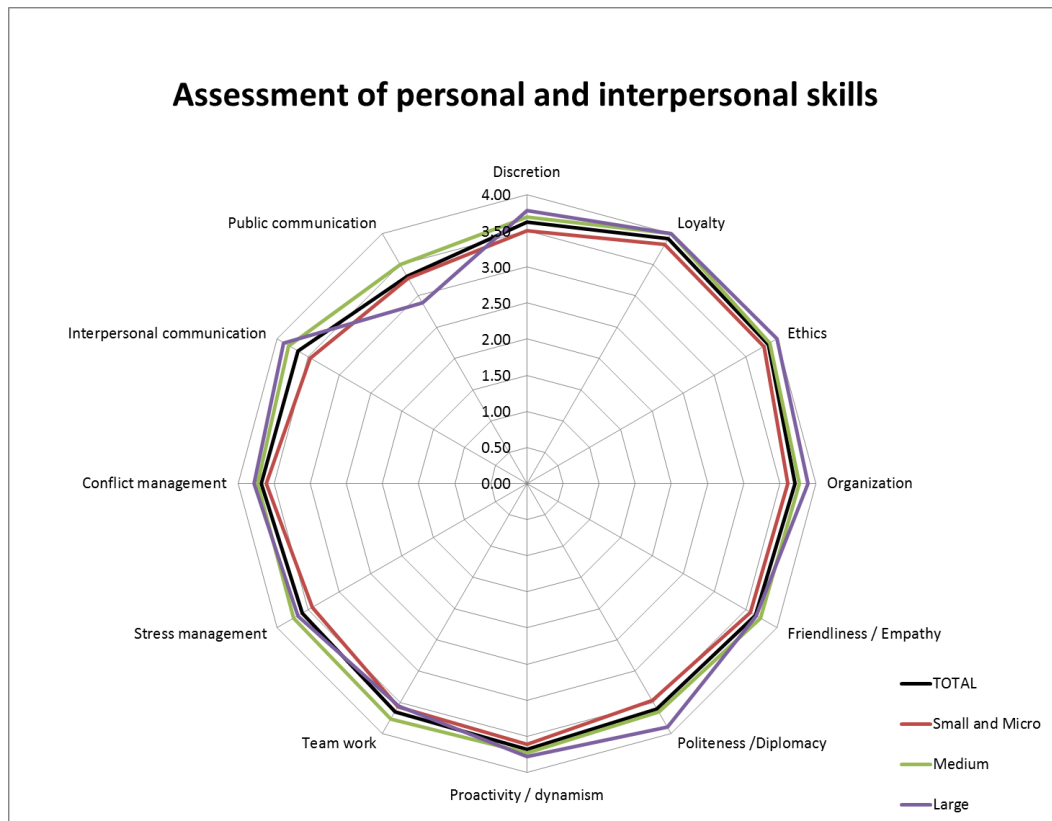


Figure 7 - Degree of importance given to personal and interpersonal skills

Finally, regarding the assessment of personal and interpersonal skills (Table 3 and Figure 7), it can be observed that all of the outlined skills are considered fundamental (the ability to speak in public is the only item that has a relatively lower importance when compared to the others, particularly in large companies).

### 3. CONCLUSION

With the present study, the research team sought to identify both the technical and transversal skills that senior management in Portuguese companies value the most in office management professionals, and the degree of importance they give to each one of the presented skills.

Results clearly point out to the high-level standards that the current marketplace demands from office management professionals, which, on the other hand, also reinforce the importance of continuous training. As we alluded to in the introduction, the challenges posed by globalization and the computerized technology spread across organizations, brought a new level of requirements to the office management profession. Thus, it is possible to verify the importance of skills such as command of foreign languages and computer tools, which have not yet replaced more traditional skills, such as reception and customer care. In fact, these professionals will always be considered, in most contexts, the first image of the organization.

The results also indicate that in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, professionals with a multi-skilled profile are highly valued. In large organizations, however, where the level of required expertise is greater, the aggregation of many different skills is no longer so relevant as tasks are distributed among several functions.

It is also important to highlight the central value given to personal and interpersonal skills. In fact, in today's organizations, these are increasingly valued skills as they promote positive interpersonal relationships among individuals. Office management professionals assume an undisputed key role: they are the linking element between management and employees, and between the company and the outside; their ability to interact with the various stakeholders of the organization, with courtesy and discretion, maintaining emotional balance and ethical sense, is absolutely paramount.

Although the presented results allow a preliminary reading on the way companies assess office management professionals, the small sample size is a threat to their generalization. Thus, it is fundamental to expand the sample in the future, particularly by increasing their proportionality in terms of geographical areas.

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